

Message Text

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SUBJECT: PRESS MATERIAL

1. HEREWITH FULL TEXT JOSEPH KRAFT COLUMN OP-ED PAGE
WASHINGTON POST THURSDAY, DECEMBER 2, HEADED "A CAUTION
LIGHT FROM SYRIA.S ASSAD."

2. DAMASCUS -- PRESIDENT HAFEZ ASSAD OF SYRIA HAS
ABANDONED HIS VETO OF EFFORTS BY EGYPT TO RENEW PEACE
TALKS WITH ISRAEL. HE IS PREPARED TO END SYRIA.S VIR-
TUAL OCCUPATION OF LEBANON AT AN EARLY DATE, AND WILL
NOT USE, OR ALLOW PALESTINIAN COMMANDOS TO USE, LEBANON
AS A PLATFORM FOR ASSAULTS ON ISRAEL. BUT HE MAKES IT
CLEAR THAT A SETTLEMENT WILL REQUIRE FACING SQUARELY
SEVERAL EXTREMELY DIFFICULT ISSUES THAT MANY SOPHISTI-
CATED PERSONS IN ISRAEL, EGYPT AND THE UNITED STATES
HOPE TO FINESSE.

3. THOSE ARE THE HIGHLIGHTS OF A LONG, WIDE-RANGING
INTERVIEW I HAD WITH PRESIDENT ASSAD THE OTHER DAY.
THE INTERVIEW TOOK PLACE AT THE PRESIDENT.S UNPRETEN-
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TIOUS OFFICE IN THE DIPLOMATIC QUARTER OF THIS CITY.

IT WAS, I THINK, THE FIRST ONE GIVEN BY THE SYRIAN
PRESIDENT SINCE HIS COUNTRY ENDED THE LEBANESE CIVIL

WAR BY A TAKEOVER OF THAT COUNTRY 10 DAYS AGO.

4. ASSAD WAS, AS ALWAYS, THOUGHTFUL IN DEMEANOR AND METICULOUS ABOUT BEING SURE THAT HE FULLY UNDERSTOOD ALL QUESTIONS. HE SHOWED NO SIGNS OF BEING COCK-A-HOOP ABOUT THE OUTCOME OF THE LONG, DRAWN-OUT LEBANESE DRAMA. NEITHER DID HE SHOW STRAIN FROM AN ENTERPRISE THAT AT TIMES BROUGHT HIM INTO CONFLICT WITH RUSSIA, THE UNITED STATES, ISRAEL, ALL THE OTHER ARAB STATES, THE PALESTINIANS AND VARIOUS COMMUNITIES IN LEBANON. ON THE CONTRARY, HE WAS AT EASE ENOUGH TO JOKE A COUPLE OF TIMES ABOUT HIS POOR ENGLISH AND HIS WEAKNESS IN THE CLASSICIAL ARABIC SPOKEN BY HIS INTERPRETER.

5. I STARTED THE QUESTIONS BY ASKING ABOUT SYRIA'S ROLE IN LEBANON, AND WHETHER THE PRESIDENT INTENDED TO KEEP HIS FORCES IN THAT COUNTRY INDEFINITELY. "I HAVE NO SUCH INTENTION AND IT HAS NEVER BEEN IN OUR MIND," HE SAID.

6. HE WOULD NOT SET A FIXED DATE FOR SYRIAN WITHDRAWAL, BUT HINGED IT TO THE RESUMPTION OF AUTHORITY BY THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT UNDER PRESIDENT ELIAS SARKIS. HE SAID HE HOPED PRESIDENT SARKIS WOULD RESTORE NORMAL AUTHORITY "AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE."

7. I TURNED THE QUESTIONS TO THE SOUTHERN FRONTIER OF LEBANON, WHICH ABUTS ISRAEL. I ASKED IF IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE -- AS THE ISRAELIS HOPED -- TO MAINTAIN A BORDER BUFFER ZONE THAT WOULD BE HELD BY CHRISTIAN AND SHIITE MOSLEM VILLAGERS NOT HOSTILE TO ISRAEL. ASSAD SAID THAT THAT WOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE. IF PRIVATE MILITIA FORCES WERE MAINTAINED ALONG THE BORDER, HE EXPLAINED, THEN VARIOUS GROUPS, INCLUDING THE PALESTINIANS, WOULD DEMAND THE RIGHT TO MAINTAIN PRIVATE FORCES ELSEWHERE IN LEBANON.

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8. BUT HE WENT ON TO SAY THAT HE DID NOT BELIEVE THE PALESTINIANS SHOULD CONTROL THE BORDER EITHER. HE FAVORED PUTTING BORDER CONTROL UNDER "A REGULAR LEBANESE FORCE," WHICH MIGHT INCLUDE ELEMENTS FROM SYRIA AND OTHER ARAB STATES.

9. I RAISED NEXT THE MATTER OF NEW MOVES TOWARD A PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT, POINTING OUT THAT PRESIDENT SADAT

OF EGYPT WAS PUSHING HARD FOR A RENEWAL OF THE EFFORTS
BROKEN OFF WHEN SYRIA OPPOSED A FOLLOWUP IN THE SECOND
SINAI WITHDRAWAL AGREEMENT NEGOTIATED BETWEEN ISRAEL

AND EGYPT BY SECRETARY OF STATE KISSINGER A YEAR AGO
SEPTEMBER.

10. PRESIDENT ASSAD SAID THAT HIS OPPOSITION TO SINAI
II WAS A THING OF THE PAST, AND THAT HE AND SADAT HAD
OVERCOME THE PHASE OF DIFFERENCES AND ENTERED INTO A
NEW PHASE OF UNDERSTANDING, COOPERATION AND COORDINA-
TION." AS TO WHETHER THE MOMENT WAS PROPITIOUS FOR
NEGOTIATION, ASSAD FLASHED THE AMBER LIGHT. HE SAID:
"I HAVE NOT SAID THAT THE TIME IS NOT RIGHT."

11. HE ALSO ACCEPTED -- AS DISTINCT FROM A PALESTINE
THAT WOULD INCLUDE ISRAEL -- SADAT.S NOTION THAT THE
PALESTINIAN PROBLEM COULD BE SETTLED BY FORMATION OF
A PALESTINIAN STATE BASED ON LAND ISRAEL NOW OCCUPIES
IN THE GAZA STRIP AND THE WEST BANK OF THE JORDAN.
"I THINK IT WOULD BE VIABLE," HE SAID, BUT HE CATE-
GORICALLY REFUSED THE VARIOUS ADJUSTMENTS THAT HAVE
BEEN SUGGESTED TO MAKE SETTLEMENT MORE PALATABLE TO
ISRAELI PUBLIC OPINION.

12. HE WAS AGAINST ANY EXCHANGE OF PEOPLES OR GOODS
BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE ARAB STATES; ANY BREAK WITH
FULL WITHDRAWAL (EVEN FOR THE PURPOSE OF ACHIEVING
DEFENSIBLE FRONTIERS) TO THE 1967 BORDERS; AND ANY
DILUTION OF PALESTINIAN REPRESENTATION OR STATEHOOD
IN FEDERATION WITH JORDAN. HE SAID: "NEITHER WE IN
SYRIA NOR THEY IN JORDAN HAVE THOUGHT OF INCLUDING
THE PALESTINIAN STATE IN THE FRAMEWORK OF ... FEDERA-
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TION."

13. EARLIER IN THE INTERVIEW, ASSAD REFERRED DIRECTLY
TO DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HIS OWN COUNTRY AND RUSSIA OVER
LEBANON, AND IMPLIED THAT THE UNITED STATES SHOULD HAVE
THE MAJOR ROLE IN MEDIATING ANY SETTLEMENT IN THE MID-
EAST. AT THE VERY END HE UNDERLINED THE EXTREME DIFFI-
CULTY OF THAT TASK WITH A CHARACTERISTICALLY RESTRAINED
COMPLIMENT TO HENRY KISSINGER. HE SAID: "I THINK THAT
OUR DIFFERENCES WITH DR. KISSINGER ... SHOULD NOT PRE-
VENT US FROM SAYING THAT DR. KISSINGER IN HIS OWN WAY
WAS SERIOUS IN THE SEARCH FOR A SOLUTION." END TEXT. ROBINSON

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